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FM AMEMBASSY ASHGABAT  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 9351  
INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE  
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE  
RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE  
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 0571  
RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA 2747  
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 0447  
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL 1030  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC  
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC  
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC  
RHMFIUU/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL  
RUCPDOG/DEPT OF COMMERCE WASHDC

UNCLAS ASHGABAT 000956

SIPDIS

STATE FOR CA/OCS/ACS, SCA/CEN

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SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: THE TRIALS OF TOURISM

11. Sensitive but unclassified. Not for Internet distribution.

12. (SBU) SUMMARY. Getting out of Turkmenistan proved as difficult as getting in for five AMCIT tourists who tried to exit with lapsed visas September 4. Negotiating Turkmenistan's rigid bureaucracy to get exit stamps took three days and cost (a negotiated) \$1,030. Turkmen officials were characteristically stern towards the tourists and unable (or unwilling) to resolve simple registration issues easily or at a low-level. The line between official fines and informal pay-offs was also, as usual, blurred. END SUMMARY.

TURKMENISTAN: BEST NOT OVERSTAY YOUR WELCOME

13. (SBU) On September 4, five AMCITS, along with four other tourists, tried to leave Turkmenistan for Uzbekistan with visas that had expired the day before. Border guards told them they would be denied exit until the State Service of Registration of Foreigners (SSRF) had extended their visas through their departure date. The travelers told us that they spent the next three days negotiating, via their guide, what they saw as a bribe down from \$4,320 to \$1,030, nearly equal to all the cash they had on hand.

14. (SBU) Maksat Orayev, Head of the SSRF's Visa Department and thus the highest ranking visa official in Turkmenistan, was already aware of the case and told us it was "resolved" when we called him September 5, two days before the travelers were allowed to leave. The central SSRF would grant extensions, he said, but had to assign fault for the overstay between the travelers and the tour agency and assess a penalty against one or both. In this case the travel agency's director in the capital signed a paper accepting liability. According to Orayev, the agency had only to pay a fine to his department in the capital, which it did the same day, and the travelers could get extension stamps in their passports and cross the border that day.

YOU CAN CHECK OUT ANY TIME YOU LIKE...

15. (SBU) The facts on the ground were different, however. Although the travel agency had accepted liability and paid the fine in Ashgabat, the local SSRF office in Dashoguz still demanded a penalty from the travelers before putting the appropriate stamps in their

passports. The travelers and the tour operator told us that the local SSRF originally demanded \$480 per person, but, after a 48-hour stalemate, accepted \$61 per person. The travelers told us that police pressured them to pay the extra penalty by forcing them to move the night of September 5 from the desert highway area where they had been sleeping in their cars to a hotel where they were checked in at the pricey foreigner rate. They didn't have to stay at that hotel, the police explained, but under Turkmenistan's law they couldn't stay anywhere else. In the end, the tourists only had so much cash (thanks to Turkmenistan's lack of ATM machines) and negotiated the penalty accordingly. The tour agency told us that the tourists left Turkmenistan unable to settle their bill with the tour operator.

16. (SBU) COMMENT: Turkmenistan's visa and registration rules are complicated and easy to break. Besides pesky registration requirements upon arrival and departure, tourists must be accompanied by a representative of their sponsoring agency when traveling and may not stray from their itinerary (our hapless travelers, for example, were not allowed to exit the country with their cars at a different border crossing, which they could have made on time). In a land where the potential for mishaps is high, the bureaucracy is rigid, and the penalties are expensive and time consuming, tourists should be warned to take extra caution to stay within Turkmenistan's rigid laws. END COMMENT.

HOAGLAND